

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**NORWEGIAN NEUTRALITY IN THE INTER-WAR YEARS**

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This SRP is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Strategic Studies Degree. The U.S. Army War College is accredited by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, 3624 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, (215) 662-5606. The Commission on Higher Education is an institutional accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

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U.S. Army War College  
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013

Report Documentation Page			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188		
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE <b>15 MAR 2006</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2005 to 00-00-2006</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Norwegian Neutrality in the Inter-War Years</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) <b>Karl Hanevik</b>				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Carlisle, PA, 17013-5050</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT <b>See attached.</b>					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>26</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

## ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Col Karl E Hanevik  
TITLE: Norwegian Neutrality In The Inter-War Years  
FORMAT: Strategy Research Project  
DATE: 15 March 2006      WORD COUNT: 8345      PAGES: 26  
KEY TERMS: Norway, World War Two, neutral, Scandinavia, Germany, United Kingdom,  
CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

During "the great war," Norway, as a young, small, insignificant state on the outskirts of Europe, remained neutral. This policy was chosen for several reasons. Following the war, Norway placed great emphasis on the "League of Nations," and hoped that this new organization would settle future disputes between states without states having to resort to war. At the same time, Norway openly stated that she would not enter bilateral or multilateral defense agreements with any other states, and would remain neutral once again, if future war should erupt on the European continent.

In spite of the political developments in Europe in the 1930's, this policy was not altered. As World War 2 began in September 1939, Norway once again declared herself neutral. Through the winter of 1939/40, Norway came more and more into the interest of the great powers. The British boarding of the German ship "Altmark" in Norwegian waters in February 1940, convinced Hitler that Norway must be occupied and planning for a German attack was intensified.

On April 9, 1940, Germany attacked Norway. After a two-month campaign, Norway capitulated to Germany, and Norway was occupied for the remainder of the war. This SRP will identify and prioritize the key issues causing the Norwegian government to remain neutral during the inter-war years.



## NORWEGIAN NEUTRALITY IN THE INTER-WAR YEARS

The German attack on Norway on April 9, 1940 and the subsequent German occupation of Norway are considered some of the most dramatic events in Norwegian history. Even though the Second World War had erupted in September of 1939 and Norway had declared herself neutral as in World War 1, the Norwegian Government was not able to avoid military action from either of the belligerents. The attack came as a complete surprise and almost a century of Norwegian isolationism and stated neutrality failed.

This SRP will identify, discuss and prioritize the key issues that caused the Norwegian government to remain neutral during the inter-war years, despite significant changes in Norway's geo-political position.

### Background

Norway has a long and colorful history. The earliest settlers came after the latest ice-age, around 10.000 B.C, and were fishers/hunters/gatherers.<sup>1</sup> Over thousands of years, the nation evolved, until it was gathered as one kingdom under King Harald Haarfagre around A.D. 870 during the Viking age. From 1380, Norway had a joint king with Denmark, and therefore entered the "Kalmar-union" in 1397, where Sweden, Denmark, and Norway joined in a union, initially under the rule of Queen Margrete.<sup>2</sup> Over the years that followed, this union dissolved and Norway became more and more a nation ruled by the Danish king. Sweden retained her sovereignty, became a regional great power, and fought numerous wars with Denmark, particularly in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. These wars were both over Norway, and over territories in (now) South Sweden, which the Danes lost to Sweden after the war from 1676 to 1679. Even though Denmark/Norway was more successful in the "Great Nordic War" between 1700 and 1720, the lost territories of 1679 were not returned. The borders between Norway and Sweden were established in 1751 and remain the same today. The last war between Sweden and Norway was fought between 1807 and 1814. From the 1600s to 1814, Norway therefore had a long history of war with Sweden.

Denmark/Norway stayed out of the Napoleonic wars, but sided with the French when the British attacked Denmark in 1807. In the following years, the British executed an effective blockade in the North Sea that denied Denmark/Norway imports of food, raw materials, and commodities. This had a severe impact on the two nations, with widespread famine as the worst effect. The Swedes lost Finland to Russia in 1809, and subsequently elected the French nobleman and Marshall Jean Baptiste Bernadotte as their crown prince (later King Carl XIV Johan of Sweden) in 1810.<sup>3</sup>

Following Napoleon's defeat in 1813, Denmark was forced to cede Norway to Sweden in the Kiel peace treaty of January 14, 1814.<sup>4</sup> This led to a Norwegian revolt. A number of Norwegian individuals (and a Danish prince) convened and quickly drafted a constitution in which Norway, on May 17, 1814, was declared as a sovereign state.<sup>5</sup>

This declaration led to Swedish military action against Norway, in which the Norwegian forces were swiftly defeated. Following peace negotiations in the late summer of 1814, the Swedish King accepted a revised Norwegian constitution as a basis for the rule of Norway. Norway now entered a union with Sweden, with a common king, but with her own parliament and prime minister. Norway was obviously the weak party of the union.

During the late 1800s, the relationship between the two countries gradually deteriorated. This was due to several issues in which the governments of the two countries had differing views.<sup>6</sup> What ultimately led to the dissolution of the union was the issue over the Norwegian right to her own foreign service, a separate Norwegian system of consulates and embassies around the world. This issue had been raised by Norway in the 1890s, but had been flatly rejected by the Swedish. When the Norwegian parliament in June of 1905, decided that a Norwegian system of consulates was to be established, the Swedish King refused to sanction this decision. This immediately led to the Norwegian Government's resignation. Constitutionally, the King was now without a Norwegian Government, and was not able to bring any Norwegian parties or politicians to form a new Government.

Following this, the Norwegian parliament, on June 7, 1905, unanimously decided that the union was dissolved, as the King was not able to form a legal Government of Norway. This decision led to Swedish threats of military action to keep Norway "in place". A national referendum in August 1905 showed strong support for the country's independence. 368,208 Norwegians voted for the dissolution of the union, whereas only 184 persons voted against it.<sup>7</sup> Parallel negotiations with Sweden and Denmark led to a peaceful settlement, with acceptance of Norway as a sovereign state on Oct 26. Norway was recognized by Russia on the 30<sup>th</sup> of October, and shortly after by Great Britain. A British ambassador to Norway was in place as soon as November 3.<sup>8</sup>

A Norwegian referendum in late October 1905 showed that about 80% of the voting population preferred a constitutional monarchy over a republic as the state system. At the same time, the Danish Prince Carl was elected as the first sole Norwegian King since medieval time, and took the Norwegian name King Haakon VII. Norway was therefore established as an independent, sovereign state from 1905 with her own royalty.

The Norwegian Government was now on its own. A “new work-day” (as it was called in Norway), started for the new nation.<sup>9</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, increasing international trade and merchant shipping had laid the foundation for Norwegian prosperity and development. The years that followed immediately after 1905 were economically prosperous, with low unemployment, increasing wages, and the establishment of Norwegian industry, the latter being based on domestic natural resources, backed by foreign technology and finance.<sup>10</sup> International relations had become more and more important for Norway, and the Norwegian Government encouraged internationalism and cooperation with other nations.

A Norwegian Department of State (“Utenriksdepartementet”) had been formed in June 1905, the overall objective of course being to promote Norwegian interests abroad. The first Norwegian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Jørgen Løvland, stated: *“[the aim should be] to keep out of participation in combinations and alliances that can drag us into belligerent adventures together with any of the European warrior states”*.<sup>11</sup>

Norway’s relationship with other nations has always been tied with her geographical position on the outskirts of Europe, on a peninsula with oceans on all sides except in the East, where Sweden is located. This, in addition to the facts that the country has limited land lines of communication and is sparsely populated, has made the Norwegians a seafaring people.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, first among Norwegian interests was the support and promotion of Norwegian shipping and trade. In the absence of supranational bodies at the time, the Norwegian authorities worked for Norwegian interests on a bilateral or multilateral basis.

The part of Norwegian foreign policy that we would now label security policy was definitely not the foremost issue for the Norwegian Government. The central reason for this was the predominant isolationist Norwegian view of Europe and the world. Norway was located on the outskirts of Europe, and had not been involved in any of the conflicts on the European continent in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. As David Thompson describes it:<sup>13</sup> *“The long period of peace since 1814 and the decline in tension with Sweden made the prospect of war seem remote, and there was also a general sense of optimism regarding peaceful resolution of disputes through arbitration”*.

The physical distance to the great powers of Europe had led Norwegians to see Norway as a peripheral nation. There was therefore a strong Norwegian perception that the country was located at a safe distance from the great powers, and that possible threats to Norwegian sovereignty were more or less non-existent. The threat from Sweden was perceived as strong in the years that followed immediately after the dissolution of the union. The threat gradually

disappeared until during the First World War, when some feared that Norway and Sweden would be forced to enter the war on either side of the belligerents.<sup>14</sup>

The three significant powers that had to be taken into account in the consideration of Norway's strategic position, were Great Britain, Germany, and Russia. Russia was perceived as a long-term challenge, if her previous expansion from the 18<sup>th</sup> century were to continue, still, Russia was relatively weak militarily in the North and had most of her fleet in the Baltic Sea.<sup>15</sup> She was therefore not perceived as a direct threat, although a general fear of Russian expansionism was expressed.

Norway had long-standing and strong ties with Great Britain, both politically and economically, but it was clear that the British had vital strategic interests linked to Norway and British dominance of the North Sea. In 1906, the British Admiral, Sir John Fisher, had made it clear to the Norwegian ambassador in London, Fridtjof Nansen, that Great Britain would occupy a Norwegian port on the South Coast if Germany occupied Denmark and closed the Baltic outlets.<sup>16</sup> For Norway, Great Britain thus became both a guarantor of and challenger to Norwegian neutrality, creating a "highwire-act" for Norwegian politicians in dealing with this situation politically. For Norway, maintaining a strong Navy was therefore considered important.

Germany was Norway's second most important trade partner after Great Britain, but did not have the same "standing" in Norway as the British. This was partly due to the traditional ties between Sweden and Germany, causing anti-Swedish sentiments to spill over towards Germany. German interests in challenging the British command of the North Sea were not perceived (in Norway) as warranting military action towards Norway.<sup>17</sup>

During the 1890s, "peace thoughts" and anti-militarism had many followers in Norway. They promoted a very idealistic view of the world as their foremost issue. The famous Norwegian author, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, was a leading figure in the peace-movement of those days, and had written (translated from Norwegian): *"The only thing the small states can do is to try to get the great powers to respect others' neutrality"*.<sup>18</sup> Many politicians followed Bjørnson in his views. In 1905, what was labeled "peace-thinking" was the preferred option for the Norwegian position. Norwegian foreign policy was therefore founded in a tradition of liberalism and optimism, as well as with a generally positive view of the surrounding world.

### Neutrality

Neutrality was defined in the international laws of war, all of which had been established before 1909 (the Paris declaration of 1856, The Hague conventions of 1907, and the London declaration of 1909).<sup>19</sup> In these regulations, neutrality was defined as a nation state's legal



status during a war. A Government could state its nation's neutrality in the event of war based on how involved the nation expected to be in the subsequent acts of war by the belligerents. The regulations aimed at securing rights for the neutral nations to retain normal international trade, as long as trade in "contraband" with the belligerents was avoided.<sup>20</sup>

In Norway, the views on what neutrality entailed were somewhat divided, although the principal choice of neutrality as the stated policy for Norway was not debated at all. Some politicians emphasized that Norway should abide by the requirements of international law by having a strong military to defend neutrality and deter attack. Others had a much more idealistic view, with close association with the peace movements and anti-militarism.<sup>21</sup> For them, it was sufficient for Norway to state the intent of remaining neutral, without any military means of backing neutrality.

In 1902, the Norwegian parliament had decided that Norway should seek a permanent treaty with the great powers about Norwegian status as neutral. Such treaties had been established by Belgium, Luxembourg, and Switzerland.<sup>22</sup> With additional regulations for international mediation and problem-solving, the Norwegians hoped that such a treaty could be the basis for an activist peace-policy that would prevent the forming of larger blocks of nations on either side. The military aspects of neutral status were perceived to be of less importance.

In this way, in Norway, national security became more tied to ideals and international law than to realistic considerations of the strategic capabilities needed to protect and defend this neutral status.

A special treaty had been agreed between Sweden/Norway, Great Britain, and France in November 1855, during the Crimean War. In return for French and British support in the event of a Russian attack, the two countries had agreed to an "English-friendly neutrality" and to never cede territory to Russia. Technically, this treaty was still valid in 1905, even though it was 50 years old.<sup>23</sup> The treaty was, however, outdated and needed to be updated if it was to have any significance. On this basis, Norway, in 1905, tried to achieve a guarantee for her neutral status from the four most important great powers, Great Britain, France, Russia, and Germany. This attempt did not succeed before 1907, when an agreement whereby France, Great Britain, Germany, and Russia guaranteed Norway's territorial integrity.<sup>24</sup>

Many viewed Norwegian isolationism as the best policy for the young nation. Professor Olav Riste explains this (author's translation): *"...Norway as a weak, small nation that seeks its defense in being far away, inaccessible, and remote from the conflict-ridden Europe. The scars from earlier Nordic wars, which had often had their origin in Swedish or Danish ambitions of playing a role in European politics, did not encourage participation in international power*

*politics. Consequently, Norway sought protection for her new independence in a isolationist and neutrality policy. By avoiding alliances or special treaties with either of the great powers, Norway would show her firm determination to remain outside future conflicts between them.*<sup>25</sup>

Behind the official Norwegian policy of neutrality in any future conflict, lay the perceived certainty of Britain being a de facto guarantor of this status. This perception was based on the British Navy's full superiority in the North Sea and in the Atlantic. Norwegian politicians considered this a guarantee against attacks from any other powers. A good relationship with Great Britain was therefore of vital importance. The fact that the Prince Carl's (Norwegian King Haakon VII after 1905) wife was a British princess (daughter of King Edward VII) had not been a factor in the choice of King in 1905, but it had certainly not been a disadvantage.

Strong nationalistic currents had been flowing in Norway since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. After 1905, the Norwegian Government therefore exercised a somewhat expansionist policy. Territories in both the Arctic and in the Antarctic were claimed. After campaigning since 1905, Norway was awarded sovereignty of the most significant of these, Spitsbergen (Svalbard), in 1920. This led to increased Norwegian control over natural resources in the Arctic Ocean.<sup>26</sup> This did not, however, change the Norwegian perception of its' strategic position.

#### Norway and World War 1

In February of 1914, the Norwegian Prime Minister, Gunnar Knudsen, stated in the Parliament that there was at present a *"world political sky without clouds"*.<sup>27</sup> That this somewhat naïve view of the world was clearly wrong was demonstrated when the "Great War" broke out a few months later. For Norway, it was of vital importance to maintain its trade, fisheries, merchant shipping, and most important, its imports of grain, coal, and fuel.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, there was a political consensus in Norway to use every means possible to remain outside of the war.

Norway declared herself neutral on August 4, 1914, three days after the German declaration of war on Russia.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, the Norwegian Navy and parts of the Army were mobilized. Consequently, in the fall of 1914, Norway stood up a relatively strong military "neutrality guard." The strong military response to the war was regarded by most politicians as a necessity for Norway to remain in accordance with international law, and in order to deter violations of Norwegian neutrality.<sup>30</sup> It was also considered necessary to have a permanent strong "neutrality guard", as this would make eventual escalation unnecessary in the event of a crisis.<sup>31</sup> In the fall of 1914, the Royal Navy tested the Norwegian response to a breach of

neutrality by entering Norwegian waters with a British Naval vessel, and was convinced of Norwegian ability and will to fend off foreign intrusions.

Even though Norway stayed neutral, it was a clearly western-oriented neutrality. Some have later called Norway “the Neutral ally,” due to her British-inclined neutrality.<sup>32</sup> This policy was, however, more or less forced upon Norway by Britain, who had interests in severing Norwegian trade with Germany. British economic warfare was not directed against Norway, but Norway became a victim of it, as Germany was an important trade partner. The neutral states were, of course, entitled to trade with either of the belligerents, but limited to “non-contraband” goods.

The British demanded full control of Norwegian trade with Germany, as well as the right to inspect any Norwegian merchant ships bound for Germany for contraband. The Germans, on the other side, waged a war by submarine against shipping bound for Britain, and as the Norwegian merchant marine was heavily involved in this, it suffered great losses. Norway, therefore, unwillingly became a participant in the economic warfare, not because the government deliberately wanted it, but due to Norway’s strategic position between the belligerents.<sup>33</sup>

The war had a decisive impact on Norway, even though Norway was not a belligerent. Internationally, the war created a deficiency of raw materials and commodities, and as Norway relied heavily on imports, she was very vulnerable to blockade by the great powers. Until 1916, this blockade had loopholes, though.<sup>34</sup> This led initially to blooming times for the domestic trade, before galloping inflation and chronic deficiencies caused a negative effect.

In 1918, food rationing became necessary. Freight rates for the Norwegian shipping soared. The cost of bringing one ton of goods over the North Sea increased from nkr 4.60 in 1914 to nkr 260 in 1917.<sup>35</sup> This “bull market” had a cost. About 900 Norwegian ships were sunk, and approximately 2,000 sailors lost their lives during the war, primarily due to the unrestricted German submarine war from 1917 on.<sup>36</sup> The ships sunk represented about half of the Norwegian tonnage of 1914. New tonnage in the post-war years enabled Norway to build the fourth largest, but most modern, merchant marine in the world before 1940. This fact had great importance in the later 1940-45 war. For some, the “Great war” brought enormous wealth. The fortunes that some gained during these years had to be invested, and numerous companies and banks were established.

### Norwegian foreign policy 1918-1939

In 1920, Norway joined the League of Nations. Some politicians considered that this was against the official policy of neutrality, but the majority thought that Norwegian relations with all the major powers would suffer if Norway stayed outside. The Norwegian delegates to the League worked consistently for disarmament and a system where disputes between nations could be solved through international law.<sup>37</sup>

As Norway entered the League of Nations in 1920, she lost some of her traditional neutrality. The League of Nations was to establish a collective security system, in which the member states were committed to participate in military sanctions if such were warranted. As this system broke down over the events in Europe in the second half of the 1930's, Norway returned to its traditional neutrality in 1938.<sup>38</sup>

The international law regulating neutrality had not, however, changed since World War 1, even though the experiences from the period had showed the deficiencies of neutral status when international trade and blockades had been taken into account. The Norwegian Government opined that a minimalist interpretation of International Law applied, and that there were no clear demands on the level of "neutrality guard" that would be required. Thus, Norway could maintain whatever military force the Government considered adequate, and be able to respond with that force if need be. In this way, the Government made it possible to downscale the military.

There were also considerable differences between the military and the political leadership in their interpretation of "rules of engagement" if there were deliberate or accidental breaches of Norwegian neutrality by any of the belligerents, particularly if any of them were to seize Norwegian territory for basing of troops. The Norwegian secretary of state, Halvdan Koht was less than clear when he stated in the Norwegian parliament (author's translation):<sup>39</sup> *"We shall protect our neutrality, but, as far as possible, not move from being neutral to being belligerent."*

At the same time that Norway had an isolationist policy, there was also a deliberate expansionism present. Based on Norwegian traditions of fisheries, hunting, and exploration in the Arctic, Norwegian claims eventually led to international acceptance for her sovereignty of Svalbard (1920), the Bouvet Island (1928), and Jan Mayen (1931). Norwegian occupation of Eastern Greenland and claims for this territory from Danish sovereignty was, however, dismissed in the International court in The Hague.<sup>40</sup>

Development of communications and internationalization of trade brought Norway closer to Europe. Norway's safe position on the outskirts of Europe was therefore gradually changed. The former distance from international conflicts was not necessarily an effective buffer

anymore. As a small state, Norway had to see herself becoming an “object” for the great powers, where Norwegian national interests had less weight than the interests of these powers, who could utilize economic or military power to support their demands.<sup>41</sup>

Of particular significance was the development of air power, which had made it possible for German air power to challenge the Royal Navy’s dominance of the North Sea. Possible air bases in Norway for either of the belligerents would therefore arguably influence the other’s options in the North Sea.<sup>42</sup>

For Germany, free access along Norway for merchant vessels with iron ore from Sweden, shipped from the Norwegian port of Narvik, was a vital interest. For the British it was of vital importance to sever this German line of communication which enabled the free supply of most important raw materials for the war effort for Germany. The British were adamant that they needed to be even more effective than during the First World War in denying the Germans these war materials. For Germany, Norway could provide bases for prosecuting the warfare against the British in the North Sea, both by air and navy assets, while at the same time, securing transports of raw materials.

The gradual change in Norway’s strategic position was largely ignored. Most Norwegian politicians and military leaders believed it was impossible for Germany to execute a preemptive strike against Norway due to the British dominance of the North Sea.<sup>43</sup> Still, in 1938 the Chief of the Norwegian Army General Staff, Colonel Otto Ruge, warned against action from any of the belligerents. In his view, Norway could be subject to several forms of action. As the Norwegian historian Tom Kristiansen puts it (author’s translation):<sup>44</sup> *“Firstly, Norway could be subject to economic pressure through sanctions or other restrictions. Secondly, the belligerents could exert political pressure on Norway through sabotage, espionage, and propaganda. Thirdly, Norway would have to expect coincidental violations on land, at sea, or in the air of her neutrality. A fourth way of exerting pressure could be aerial attacks. Finally, his worst case scenario was a deliberate violation of Norwegian neutrality, in that a belligerent could occupy a limited area to use it militarily.”* Consequently, Ruge considered Norway to be in the “fireline” between the Soviet Union, Germany, and Great Britain, and warned that Norway could well be subject to military action in the early stages of a future war. His opinion was, however, only shared by the Army General Staff, and not by the Navy or the Norwegian politicians.

Before 1918, the “old” political parties, the conservatives and the liberals, had been the main alternatives at the elections. The liberals, the party “venstre”, had a one-party majority of the representatives in the Norwegian Parliament from 1913 to 1918, and therefore formed a strong Government with full support of the Parliament during the war. After 1918, no political

parties achieved majority. This situation lasted until 1940, and caused weaker and more unstable governments that had to seek support from the Parliament either on a case by case basis or by entering coalitions with other parties.<sup>45</sup> From 1918 to 1935, 10 different minority Governments were in office for varying periods of time.

The Labour Party had been formed in 1887 and achieved an increasing number of representatives in the Parliament in the elections after 1905, even though it openly stated that it *“reserved the right to lead a revolution of the masses, even if it did not have a majority in the Storting”* (Parliament).<sup>46</sup> During the 1920s, the Labour Party became even stronger in Norwegian politics. The Moscow-loyal communists broke out of the party in 1923 and formed the Communist Party. In 1928, the very first labour minority-Government was formed, as the Labour Party had become the largest party in the 1927 elections. Still, this government only lasted a few weeks before the opposition, consisting of conservatives and liberals voted them out of office. In 1933, the Labour Party achieved about 40% of the votes in the elections, and formed the Government in 1935. This Labour Government was to remain in office until 1940, and had to deal with the difficulties and challenges of the late 1930s, as the clouds over Europe gathered.<sup>47</sup>

The Labour Party had a long history of anti-militarism. The traditional fear that military forces could be used by a bourgeois leadership against the working classes was widespread. There was also a strong perception in the party that the officer corps was largely conservative and could therefore not be trusted. The fact that the national socialist and Army officer, Vidkun Quisling, was Minister of Defense in one of the Liberal Governments from 1931-1933 also fueled anti-militarism in the Labour Party. Until 1935, the Labour Party consequently voted against any apportionment of funds to the military in Norway.<sup>48</sup>

After forming the Government in 1935, the Labour Party had to change course. This was, of course, due to the changing political environment in Europe, but also due to a general domestic political consensus that the Armed Forces needed better funding after years of “financial famine”. In the years that followed, the Government therefore increased the funding for military matters. Still, the former anti-militarists, now in position, were not able to provide clear guidance on priorities and objectives. It was also difficult for them to understand military matters.<sup>49</sup>

Scholars retrospectively agree that there was no political dissent in Norway in the 1930's on the policy of Norway's status as a neutral in the event of a conflict in Europe. This was in line with official policy going back to the first independent government. There was also full agreement that there was no need for any alliances with any other nations. Even the question

of limited military cooperation with Denmark and Sweden on “early warning,” intelligence, and materiel procurements was hotly debated. Still, there was considerable disagreement between the political and military leaders on what the neutral status would require of Norway. In political circles, a perception of neutrality as a more moral status for a nation than some other security arrangement was established. In many ways, one can argue that an idealistic, moral, and somewhat naïve view on neutrality persisted among central politicians.<sup>50</sup>

In the late 1930's the Norwegian opinion was clearly on the side of Great Britain and of the Western democracies against Hitler-Germany. If the policy of neutrality would fail, it was therefore pertinent not to enter the war on the “wrong side,” i.e. against Great Britain. With this in mind it is understandable that the Norwegian response favoured Great Britain, both in the Altmark affair, and in the matter of the British mine-laying along the Norwegian coast on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April. These responses were less forceful than they would have been against German similar actions.<sup>51</sup>

As the Norwegian historian Tom Kristiansen puts it (author's translation):<sup>52</sup> *“There was no doubt that it was the fascist states and the Soviet Union that destabilized the world in the 1930s. Against the totalitarian states, Britain stood in the first line. In this situation, could it be defended politically and morally, that the battle the British fought, that would benefit all free nations, should not have the support of the Norwegian authorities? Winston Churchill pointed at this moral dilemma when he admitted that the neutral, small, western states neither could nor would support a policy that would favor their long term interests, and that was in accordance with their political values, because the regulations for neutrality stood as a barrier.”*

#### The Norwegian Armed Forces

The Norwegian Army has a history that goes back to 1628. The Navy was formally established in 1814. Before 1814, the military of Norway was controlled from Denmark, and both in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, wars were fought with Sweden. After 1814, the Norwegian military achieved a somewhat more independent role towards the Swedish Armed Forces.

The Norwegian military “establishment” was never a large one. Limited conscription was introduced in 1854, but the mandatory training time for the soldiers was short. Periodical “refresher training” of the mobilization forces was to establish acceptable military units to counter attacks against Norway. A cadre of professional officers and NCOs manned the small staffs of the mobilization units, and were responsible for keeping operational plans current as well as organizing the periodic refresher training periods. There existed very few permanently

manned units in the Army, but these were at company and battalion level, and had the missions of guarding the royalty, and controlling the border.

From 1889, the Norwegian Army was organized in three general categories of units. "Linjen" ("the line") included the most prioritized units, which were regionally located. On paper, the Norwegian Army of the 1890s could mobilize five infantry brigades of "Linjen", each with four battalions, as well as cavalry, artillery, and service support units. In addition, a significant number of units of lower priority existed on mobilizational status, with local area defense in mind. These units were manned with older conscripted personnel when mobilized, and had limited capabilities, but were still an asset that had to be taken into account by a potential aggressor. Some cooperation with the Swedish existed, but mostly over material procurements and standardization of ammunition, arms, and supplies. Deep mistrust between the nations resulted in numerous defensive positions being built against the Swedish border in the expectation of an attack.

In the 1890s, the Norwegian Parliament prioritized the Armed Forces in the national budget and increased funding significantly. This led to important materiel procurements and more training time, as well as construction of more defensive positions in the East against Sweden. The most important effect was still that the Navy procured new ships, among them several modern battleships and cruisers, and its' capabilities were increased significantly. Until this time, the Navy had had a role in decentralized coastal defense, and had only been equipped with small vessels. From the 1890's, the Navy's role was widely seen as to defend Oslo against a Swedish naval attack. The Navy was therefore largely based in the Oslofjord, South of Oslo. It is generally accepted that the Norwegian Navy was at a peak in capability in 1905. This may have had an impact on the Swedish decision not to go to military action in 1905.

In the years that followed 1905, the previous political prioritization of the Armed Forces vanished. Still, in particular the Norwegian Navy was able to "float" on the capacity of 1905, and was therefore able to mount an acceptable naval "neutrality guard" during the First World War. The Army was worse off and deteriorated towards 1914. Still, some Army units were mobilized during the war and conducted border control, especially on the borders in the north. Demobilization of these units was started during the summer of 1918, as it seemed the war was reaching an end. The Navy was kept in place until after the armistice.

The years of "neutrality guard" during the war caused considerable strains on the Armed Forces. Even though the Army and Navy managed their tasks and Norway stayed out of the war, shortage of personnel and material had significant effects.



After 1918, a significant downscaling of the defense was initiated. Most other nations did the same. In Norway, most politicians saw future war as only a remote possibility. The overwhelming view was that the horrors of the “Great War” would lead to a long period of peace and stability. Norwegians had great faith in arms control and in that the League of Nations would deal with future disputes between states. Many also considered that the experiences of the neutral status during the war, as well as Great Britain’s continued strong position in the North Sea, ensured that a similar policy would enable Norway to remain neutral once again, if war should break out.<sup>53</sup>

Consequently, the Norwegian Armed Forces was not prioritized in the national budget, and gradually deteriorated. New technology and operational techniques were not taken into account. Several major studies of the Norwegian Defense structure were carried out in the years that followed 1918, each resulting in gradual reductions of its size and structure. At the same time, the Army and Navy were consistently under funded, so that even the dwindling structure did not get the personnel resources, the materiel and, most important, the training that was necessary. On paper, the Armed Forces consisted of a significant number of units and capabilities, but as training was almost non-existent, the capabilities were questionable, indeed.

In Norway, conscription had been utilized for a very long period to supply the Armed Forces with soldiers. The compulsory service had been of varying duration, but a system of mobilization had been possible to establish. Some argued that the length of the compulsory service, which was typically about 3 months (and an additional 3-6 weeks of refresher training in mobilization units) in the Army from 1905-1920, was not sufficient to produce units with acceptable standard.

In 1933, further changes in the Armed Forces were implemented, most significantly for the Army. Significant parts of the Army were placed in “long-term storage”. In other words, the units existed on paper, but no training was performed, nor was the materiel updated or acceptably maintained. The Army’s ability to mobilize was therefore seriously affected in a negative way. No tests of the mobilization system were performed. The length of the compulsory service in the Army was also reduced even further. An infantry recruit of the mid-1930s served only 72 days, hardly enough to make him an acceptable soldier, and definitely not to produce units capable of countering any future attack on Norway. Other branches in the Army were even worse off, some only training the soldiers 48 days.

The deterioration of the military in the 1930s was partly due to political sentiments that there was no need for a strong military, but also over the fact that the Norwegian state finances

were not very strong at the time. The depression hit Norway as any other state in Europe, resulting in widespread unemployment, reduced revenues for the Government, and a definite need to use Government funds for aid to people in need. Some few politicians argued that more should be spent on the military, but this was basically not possible, due to the overwhelming needs in other sectors of the society. The general political consensus at the time indicated spending as little as possible on the military at the time, effectively causing the military to be "mothballed" and not being the national instrument of power it could have been.

Shortly before the First World War, the first airplanes had come to Norway. Both the Army and the Navy established their own air elements. Attempts to create an Air Force as a separate service were not successful due to strong opposition from the services. In 1936, Colonel Ruge, as head of a commission on the issue, argued for establishing a separate Air Force, and establishing an offensive bomber capability. The Navy disagreed, as did most politicians in the Parliament. Additionally, insufficient funding made the idea of a strong Air Force absolutely impossible to implement. In the last years of the 1930s, the Norwegian military therefore had a number of older, almost obsolete airplanes, with insufficient training standard and fragmented command and control. This hardly represented a match for any modern Air Force of the day,

In 1936, colonel Ruge stated that the foremost task for the military as a "neutrality guard" would be to prevent the outbreak of war in Norway. A capability for rapid mobilization of land forces and adequate ability to respond to neutrality breaches from the belligerents were therefore important. Despite this view, little was done to implement changes and improvements.

In the 1920s, for some, the perceived threat on Norway had been seen as internal, not as coming from any other states.<sup>54</sup> To some degree, the revolutionary inclination of the Labour Party in the early 1920s had caused a fear that a revolution might be launched, and that workers might attack military stores to seize firearms. Regulations for safer storage of firearms were therefore issued, and general planning for countering the threat was carried out. In retrospect, there was no real danger for any revolution in Norway, but the mistrust between the labour party and the military remained strong for many years.

Shortly after the labour party came into power in 1935, they had to change their previous anti-militaristic views. In 1936, the Labour Government suggested additional funding for the military to overcome obvious shortages. The obvious reason for this was the clouds gathering over Europe and the perception that war may be in the coming. Increased funding for the military in the years that followed made it possible to improve training and exercises, and some "refresher training" of mobilization units was carried out. Procurements of materiel, particularly

from abroad, remained difficult. Most foreign vendors of military materiel had obligations towards their own governments, and could not prioritize Norwegian contracts. The increased spending in the late 1930s may therefore be seen as “too little, too late”.

Consequently, severe deficiencies existed as Norway approached 1939. The mobilization system remained slow and cumbersome, the training standard had deteriorated severely due to chronic lack of exercises, and the materiel was old and worn, and not at all updated for modern warfare. Furthermore, the places for mobilization were placed far from the areas of Norway that were perceived to be of highest importance, the South-West part and North Norway. The added priority to the Armed Forces and the increased funding in the late 1930s did not cause any significant improvements. The Norwegian military was therefore in a sad state as the war in Europe erupted in 1939.

#### Norwegian foreign policy 1939-1940

The same day that Germans attacked Poland, the Norwegian Government issued a proclamation that Norway would remain neutral in the conflict. As Great Britain declared war on Germany two days later, another proclamation of neutrality was issued. By the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September 1939, both Germany and Great Britain had issued statements that they would respect Norwegian neutrality.<sup>55</sup>

There was no debate over the policy of neutrality. This was seen as the obvious alternative for Norway, and many politicians thought that the situation would be about the same as in the 1914-1918 conflict. An important difference was, however, that Norway was not in a position to mount an acceptable “neutrality guard.” The Army units were few and had severe shortages of materiel, personnel, and officers. Their training status was poor, as few exercises had been carried out in the inter-war years. The situation for the Navy was even worse, as it had almost not been able to exercise between 1918 and 1937, and had most serious shortages of qualified officers and sailors. Furthermore, the fleet was outdated technically. Of the 62 vessels that existed in the Norwegian Navy of 1939, 43 had been commissioned between 1874 and 1918. The coastal artillery had been in “hibernation” for many years, and also suffered from lack of training, as well as lack of officers and personnel. Consequently, the Navy and coastal defense had a most limited capability in 1939. Mobilization of the force was therefore practically impossible, especially compared to 1914. Still, a number of Navy ships were manned and established a limited “neutrality guard,” with much less capability than in 1914.<sup>56</sup>

When the Winter-war between Finland and the USSR broke out in December 1939, more army forces were mobilized, especially to increase the border guard in the North. In January 1940, the 6<sup>th</sup> brigade had a total of 9,500 troops mobilized and in place in the Northern counties of Troms and Finnmark.<sup>57</sup> When the war ended in March 1940, the troops were retained to counter any Soviet threat.

During the Winter War between Finland and the Soviet Union, the British requested Norwegian acceptance of using the port of Narvik for shipping troops and materiel to Finland. This request was declined by the Norwegian Government. The British made plans for a seizure of the port and thereby attacking Norway openly in February of 1940, but execution of this enterprise was not needed as the war in Finland ended in early March.

From September 1939 to the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 1940, there were numerous violations of Norwegian neutrality from both the belligerents. Norwegian authorities also violated the neutrality rules by allowing the British to send armaments to Finland over Norwegian territory. Later, in deep secrecy, Norway sent 12 artillery pieces and 12,000 shells to Finland from Norwegian Army stores. Both Britain and Germany violated Norwegian airspace repeatedly. Still, these violations did not cause Norwegian military responses from the “neutrality guard”. Cautious and insignificant diplomatic protests from Norway had little impact on the great powers.

The violation of Norwegian neutrality that happened in February 1940 was one that sparked more reactions. The British boarded the German ship “Altmark” in a Norwegian fjord and freed 299 British prisoners of war that were on board. The Royal Navy had been searching for the “Altmark,” but had not discovered her before she entered Norwegian waters on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February. “Altmark” sailed under German flag and entered Norwegian waters according to international law. The Norwegians demanded inspection of the vessel, but this was declined. Still, the “Altmark” was allowed to pass with Norwegian Navy escort, in violation of neutrality rules. On the evening of the 15<sup>th</sup>, the British entered Norwegian waters with Royal Navy vessels, and boarded the “Altmark”. Seven German sailors were killed, and all the POWs were freed. Norwegian Navy ships did not oppose the British breach of Norwegian sovereignty and neutrality.

There were strong protests from the German authorities about the Norwegians allowing the incident to happen. The Norwegian protests to the British were equally strong. Norwegian, Swedish and American experts on international law declared that the British had violated Norwegian neutrality severely. The British admitted to a “technical violation” but claimed they had a moral right for this violation. The incident further encouraged German planning for the subsequent attack on Norway, which eventually started on April 9,

1940.<sup>58</sup> The British mining of Norwegian ports on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April caused protests from the Norwegians, but the German attack the next day caused Norway to side with the British, and that closed the arguments. The British mining provided the Germans with a plausible cause for the attack on the 9<sup>th</sup>, but planning for the German attack had, of course, been underway for several months.

None of the belligerents had plans for military action against Norway when the Second World War broke out.<sup>59</sup> Initially, control of trade was the issue of interest for the belligerents. The British blockade of Germany denied her access to foreign markets, and therefore made trade with the neutral nations of Europe more important for the Germans. This is exemplified by the fact that the German ambassador to Norway approached Norwegian authorities on the 4<sup>th</sup> of September 1939, and demanded that the trade between the two countries would have to be maintained at the pre-war level, or Germany would be forced to take any necessary measures.<sup>60</sup> In other words, Norway was met with a mix of wishes, demands and threats from one of the belligerent nations. This should have alerted Norwegian authorities significantly.

### Conclusion

Based on the discussion above, there are several reasons why the Norwegian authorities stuck to a policy of neutrality until the German attack on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 1940.

The first and foremost reason is probably that neutrality was chosen “by default”. This had been the traditional policy for thirty five years, was perceived as having worked during World War 1 and was therefore the obvious choice for the Norwegian politicians. It is worth noting that there was almost no discussion whatsoever about this fundamental choice among politicians all across the political landscape, as the discussion was more over which forces should be kept to guard this neutrality. It is also a point that the Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs after 1935, Halvdan Koht, was a former military objector, a history professor and a firm idealist, and showed both anti-militarism and distrust for the military authorities. This caused him not to understand military matters, but also not to listen to advice from the military. His failed interpretation of the situation through to 1940 must have been significant, although the cabinet members, in general, shared his opinions.

The second most important reason may be that Norwegian authorities failed to analyze the experiences of World War 1, and did not see that Norway’s strategic position inbetween the great powers had changed with new military technology, notably airplanes and submarines, which had totally new capacities compared to World War 1. Many believed that Norway’s location at the outskirts of Europe would keep her out of any future conflict on the continent.

The third reason, linked somewhat to the first, is that there is reason to claim that the Norwegian politicians had a deep rooted idealism, firmly believing that international disputes should be solved via arbitration and international law. They were therefore fundamentally “anti-war” and somewhat “anti-militarist”. This was the case for many politicians, both in the labour party, but also among the liberals and to some degree among the conservatives. Even after the breakdown of the League of Nations in the late 1930's, this Norwegian idealism did not change. The failure of international sanctions to deter some states from military action should have warned the Norwegian politicians during those years.

A fourth reason to keep in mind was the distinct perception in Norway that Great Britain would support and fight for Norway if Germany was to attack. A British “security guarantee” was not officially given by the British. Still, this was inferred by Norwegian politicians who believed that Britain would never allow Germany bases in Norway without interfering. Several comments that Norway should try to stay out of the war by all means, but also avoid “coming into the war on the wrong side” were made unofficially. The perception about the British as a de-facto “back-up” was strong, but was not followed up with actual preparations for support, as this would have constituted a breach of the neutrality rules.

All in all, the policy of neutrality failed when Germany attacked on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 1940, and Norway entered the war on the side of Great Britain. Norwegian requests for military assistance were answered positively, but, for several reasons, the campaign in Norway resulted in the complete loss of Norway to Germany.

The most significant result of the pre-war neutrality and the experiences of the war, was that Norwegian politicians became willing to let Norway enter the NATO in 1949. By that, the forty four year history of Norwegian neutrality was buried.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The general Norwegian history has been accessed at the internet or has been found in general books on the topic. The general historical points made in the SRP are not controversial and are mentioned in numerous sources. See: <http://historie.cappelen.no/historie1/kap11/>.

<sup>2</sup> Norwegian history, accessed on the internet at: <http://historie.cappelen.no/historie1/kap13/>.

<sup>3</sup> Scandinavian history, accessed on the internet at: <http://historie.cappelen.no/historie1/kap17/>.

<sup>4</sup> Norwegian history, accessed on the internet at: <http://lotus.uib.no/norgeslexi/kronologien/perioder/1800tallet.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Norwegian history, accessed on the internet at:  
<http://www.eidsvoll1814.no/?aid=9043761>.

<sup>6</sup> Norwegian history, accessed on the internet at:  
<http://historie.cappelen.no/historie2/kap2/>.

<sup>7</sup> Norwegian history, accessed on the internet at:  
[http://www.nrk.no/underholdning/store\\_norske/4248864.html](http://www.nrk.no/underholdning/store_norske/4248864.html).

<sup>8</sup> Petersen, Jan, Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs, speech accessed on the Internet at: <http://odin.dep.no/odinarkiv/norsk/ud/2005/taler/032171-090391/dok-bn.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Norwegian history, accessed on the internet at:  
[http://www.nrk.no/underholdning/store\\_norske/4278921.html](http://www.nrk.no/underholdning/store_norske/4278921.html).

<sup>10</sup> Professor Emeritus Leiv Mjeldheim, University of Bergen, article on the Norwegian economic and social development in the inter-war years, accessed on the internet at:  
<http://www.hist.uib.no/norskhistorie/studieboka/emne9.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> Riste, Olav: *The Neutral Ally* (Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1965), page 29.

<sup>12</sup> Professor Olav Riste, University of Bergen, article on the inter-war years, accessed on the internet at: <http://www.hist.uib.no/norskhistorie/studieboka/emne12.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> Thompson, David G. *From neutrality to NATO: The Norwegian Armed Forces and Defence Policy 1905-1965* (Ohio State University, 1965), page 20.

<sup>14</sup> Dr. Tom Kristiansen, IFS, Oslo, lecture accessed on the Internet at:  
<http://www.oslomilsamfund.no/foredrag/2004/2004-11-15%20Kristiansen.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Rolf Hobson and Tom Kristiansen: *Norsk Forsvarshistorie, bind 3, 1905-1940* (Bergen, Eide Forlag 2001), page 79.

<sup>17</sup> Derry, T. K. : United Kingdom Military Series, "*The campaign in Norway*", accessed on the Internet at: <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/UN/UK/UK-NWE-Norway/UK-NWE-Norway-1.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Maseng, Ainar: Article about the Norwegian peace movement around 1900, accessed on the Internet at: <http://arno.daastol.com/history/maseng.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Hobson/Kristiansen, 57-59.

<sup>20</sup> Dr. Tom Kristiansen, IFS, Oslo, lecture accessed on the Internet at:  
<http://www.oslomilsamfund.no/foredrag/2004/2004-11-15%20Kristiansen.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Hobson/Kristiansen, 56.

<sup>23</sup> Kolle, Andreas: *"Jugglery with words"* (masters degree paper on Norwegian history around 1905), accessed on the internet at: <http://www.hf.uio.no/hi/prosjekter/Prosjekt1905/publikasjon/kolle.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Danielsen, Dyrvik, etc: *Norway: A History from the Vikings to Our Own Times* (Scandinavian University Press AS, Oslo), 1995, page 348.

<sup>25</sup> Professor Olav Riste, University of Bergen, article on the inter-war years, accessed on the internet at: <http://www.hist.uib.no/norskhistorie/studieboka/emne12.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> Norwegian history, accessed on the internet at: <http://www.uib.no/elin/elpub/uibmag/4-95/38.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Hobson/Kristiansen, 68.

<sup>28</sup> Hobson/Kristiansen, 82.

<sup>29</sup> Hobson/Kristiansen, 84.

<sup>30</sup> Dr. Tom Kristiansen, IFS, Oslo, lecture accessed on the Internet at: <http://www.oslomilsamfund.no/foredrag/2004/2004-11-15%20Kristiansen.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Riste, Olav. *The Neutral Ally, Norway's Relations With Belligerent Powers In The First World War* (Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, London, Allen & Unwin 1965), page 55.

<sup>33</sup> Professor Olav Riste, University of Bergen, article on the inter-war years, accessed on the internet at: <http://www.hist.uib.no/norskhistorie/studieboka/emne12.htm>.

<sup>34</sup> Thompson, David G. *From neutrality to NATO: The Norwegian Armed Forces and Defence Policy. 1905-1965*. Ohio State University, 1965, page 29.

<sup>35</sup> Norwegian statistics on trade during the first world war, accessed on the internet at: <http://www.gubben.no/index2.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Thompson, 47. Also mentioned in: United Kingdom Military Series, "The campaign in Norway" by T. K. Derry, accessed on the Internet at: <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/UN/UK/UK-NWE-Norway/UK-NWE-Norway-1.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Thompson, 48. Also mentioned in: Article by Professor Olav Riste, University of Bergen, on the inter-war years, accessed on the internet at: <http://www.hist.uib.no/norskhistorie/studieboka/emne12.htm>.

<sup>38</sup> Danielsen, Dyrvik, 348.

<sup>39</sup> Dr. Tom Kristiansen, IFS, Oslo, lecture accessed on the Internet at: <http://www.oslomilsamfund.no/foredrag/2004/2004-11-15%20Kristiansen.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Professor Olav Riste, University of Bergen, article on the inter-war years, accessed on the internet at: <http://www.hist.uib.no/norskhistorie/studieboka/emne12.htm>.



<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Dr. Tom Kristiansen, IFS, Oslo, lecture accessed on the Internet at:  
<http://www.oslomilsamfund.no/foredrag/2004/2004-11-15%20Kristiansen.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Professor Emeritus Leiv Mjeldheim, University of Bergen, article on the Norwegian economic and social development in the inter-war years, accessed on the internet at:  
<http://www.hist.uib.no/norskhistorie/studieboka/emne9.htm>.

<sup>46</sup> Danielsen, Dyrvik, 334.

<sup>47</sup> Professor Emeritus Leiv Mjeldheim, University of Bergen, article on the Norwegian economic and social development in the inter-war years, accessed on the internet at:  
<http://www.hist.uib.no/norskhistorie/studieboka/emne9.htm>.

<sup>48</sup> Thompson, 90-97. Also mentioned in: Article about Norwegian history, accessed on the internet at: [http://www.nrk.no/underholdning/store\\_norske/4334290.html](http://www.nrk.no/underholdning/store_norske/4334290.html).

<sup>49</sup> This fact is mentioned in a number of sources, as well as in an article about Norwegian history, accessed on the internet at:  
[http://www.nrk.no/underholdning/store\\_norske/4334290.html](http://www.nrk.no/underholdning/store_norske/4334290.html).

<sup>50</sup> Dr. Tom Kristiansen, IFS, Oslo, lecture accessed on the Internet at:  
<http://www.oslomilsamfund.no/foredrag/2004/2004-11-15%20Kristiansen.html>.

<sup>51</sup> Article by Professor Olav Riste, University of Bergen, on the inter-war years, accessed on the internet at: <http://www.hist.uib.no/norskhistorie/studieboka/emne12.htm>.

<sup>52</sup> Dr. Tom Kristiansen, IFS, Oslo, lecture accessed on the Internet at:  
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<sup>53</sup> Article by Professor Olav Riste, University of Bergen, on the inter-war years, accessed on the internet at: <http://www.hist.uib.no/norskhistorie/studieboka/emne12.htm>.

<sup>54</sup> Thompson, 62-76. Also mentioned in numerous other sources.

<sup>55</sup> Hobson/Kristiansen, 244.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 245.

<sup>57</sup> Encyclopedia article about Neutrality Guard, accessed on the Internet at:  
<http://lotus.uib.no/norgeslexi/krigslex/n/n6.html#noytralitetspolitikken>.

<sup>58</sup> Encyclopedia article about the "Altmark Incident", accessed on the Internet at:  
<http://lotus.uib.no/norgeslexi/krigslex/a/a2.html#altmarksaken>.

<sup>59</sup> Odd-Bjørn Fure: *Mellomkrigstid 1920-1940* (Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1996), page 312.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, page 312, quoting from meetings in the expanded Norwegian committee of foreign affairs.